

Blossom Festival Band salutes America in performance on eve of Independence Day (June 3)

by Daniel Hathaway | ClevelandClassical.com

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Blossom Music Center hosted its annual Salute to America on Wednesday night. In this 2021 file photo, spectators watch as fireworks burst over the pavilion. David Petkiewicz, [cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com)

CUYAHOGA FALLS, Ohio — Conversations with fellow audience members at the Blossom Festival Band's Salute to America last night, July 3, revealed that many had been glued to weather radar screens all afternoon in hopes that forecasts of evening thunderstorms would turn out to be wrong.

They were. Though some late afternoon rainfall increased humidity levels, the skies

cleared and a large throng turned out to enjoy eve-of-Independence Day picnics on the lawn and band music from the pavilion stage — a Fourth of July tradition ever since the Blossom Music Center launched its second season in 1969.

Innumerable wind ensembles are featured in outdoor performances around Independence Day each year in America, but the Blossom Festival Band stands out for its excellent roster of musicians and soloists and its distinguished lineage of conductors.

That list includes Meredith Willson, composer of *The Music Man* (1969-1973), cornet virtuoso Leonard B. Smith (1972-1997), and Library of Congress musicologist Loras John Schissel (who wielded the baton from 1998 until his retirement in 2023).

Wednesday's excellent performances by the fifty-some musicians were conducted by Galen S. Karriker. Director of bands at the University of Akron, Karriker also served as the voluble and audience-engaging emcee for the evening.

After a drum roll brought the audience to its feet for *The Star-Spangled Banner*, the first-rate ensemble showed off its agile brass, producing a majestic sound in John Williams' *Liberty Fanfare*, a piece commissioned to celebrate the Centennial of the Statue of Liberty in 1986.

Although 12 selections were listed in the printed program, inserted numbers took the total up to 19, beginning with John Philip Sousa's *Hail to the Spirit of Liberty*, that greatest-of-all composer of marches — who proudly took his band to represent the United States at the Paris Exposition of 1900.

The program took a lyrical turn with Percy Grainger's *Colonial Song*, originally a piano piece written in 1911 as a gift to his mother, Rose and re-gifted by Karriker to all the mothers in the Blossom audience. In one of the standout pieces on the agenda, the Band produced a huge, wonderfully blended sound and ended with a long, well balanced diminuendo.

Introducing *Cosmopolitan America*, written for the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and chosen as the official march for Theodore Roosevelt's presidential campaign, Karriker asked the crowd if they'd ever heard of its composer, Helen May Butler.

Turns out that Butler directed a premier group of professional female musicians advertised as "Helen May Butler and Her Ladies' Military Band," and was frequently referred to as the Female Sousa. *Cosmopolitan America*, a striking piece, opens with a fanfare and features smooth harmonic cadences.

The evening featured plenty of medleys. Stephen Bulla's Ellington!, a snappy collection of some of The Duke's most recognizable pieces, included It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing), Caravan, and Take the "A" train.

Before heading into selections from The Music Man, a rubber chicken was thrown onto the stage — an inside joke, but a sign, Karriker said, that Loras John Schissel was watching over the proceedings.

Warren Barker's The Symphonic Gershwin visited themes from An American in Paris, Rhapsody in Blue, and Cuban Overture.

The customary Salute to the Armed Forces was recently expanded to include the U.S. Space Force that was established in 2019, and Karriker invited audience members who had served to stand when their theme songs came around.

Ryan Nowlin's Let Freedom Ring highlighted a local connection. The Cleveland native became the 29th Director of The President's Own United States Marine Band on December 20, 2023. His engaging piece is a stirring fantasy on a phrase from My Country, 'Tis of Thee.

The evening ended with a patriotic triptych. Samuel Ward's America the Beautiful served as a calming respite from military anthems and marches, Irving Berlin's God Bless America got the audience involved in a sing-along, and — no surprise — John Philip Sousa's iconic march, The Stars and Stripes Forever, brought everything to a festive close with piccolos and brass front and center. And the weather allowed for a noisy and colorful fireworks display after all.

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